Dead Boys and Adolescent Girls: Unjoining the *Bildungsroman* in Carson McCullers’ *The Member of the Wedding* and Toni Morrison’s *Sula*

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In Carson McCullers’ first novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) her adolescent girl protagonist, Mick Kelly, is left to deal with the aftermath of the accidental shooting of a three-year neighbourhood girl, Baby, by her beloved younger brother, Bubber. Mick lies to Bubber, who has hidden himself away after the accident, telling him that Baby has died when she is only wounded, and that he is going to the electric chair for what he has done. Convinced that she can manage Bubber, Mick thinks her intervention will ensure that “he would never want to pick up a gun again in all his life” (*Heart* 151). Bubber is never the same: after the combination of the shooting and Mick’s symbolic execution of him, he withdraws into himself and from the world. Mick’s part in the cutting off of a future for the initially intellectually curious and engaging Bubber is one of the minor tragedies of the book, but her tough, almost sadistic treatment of her brother also co-exists, inextricably, with something much more tender. The night following the shooting, after Bubber has been retrieved from a runaway attempt and then cried himself to sleep, Mick gets into bed with him:

She was awake a long time. In the dark she put her arms around him and held him very close. She touched him all over and kissed him everywhere. He was so soft and little and there was this salty, boy smell about him. The love she felt was so hard that she had to squeeze him to her until her arms were tired. In her mind she thought about Bubber and music together. It was like she could never do anything good enough for him. She would never hit him or tease him again. She slept all night with her arms around his head. Then in the morning when she woke up he was gone. (*Heart* 159)

Mick’s sensual, affectionate care for Bubber reveals a maternal, idealizing, and erotic fascination with the small, “soft” body of the young boy (their mother is dead and Mick looks after Bubber and their baby brother); yet the love Mick feels for Bubber is also “hard” and deadly—the squeeze which breaks bones and selves. He himself hardens because of the incident, rejecting both Mick’s attempts at comfort and his nickname, the soft, tearful-sounding Bubber, and reverting to his given name, George.

In this article I want to map the contours of this ambivalent, loving and deadly relationship between an adolescent girl and a much younger (effeminate and/or unformed) boy, as it is revealed in another McCullers’ novel, *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) and in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (1973). These novels are harsh on their adolescent girl protagonists, yet they arguably fare better than their younger male counterparts, who wind up dying dramatically. What is the relationship between the violent ejecting of a young boy from the plot and the (shaky or anti-) developmental storylines that result for their adolescent girl heroines?

Recently, there has been a spate of queer critical work on the ways in which, in a range of works, the queer child (or the child as a trope for the potential queerness of temporality itself) functions to disrupt teleological developmental narrative (oriented towards adulthood and heteronormative reproduction), even as s/he also functions as its best guarantor.[[1]](#endnote-1) But it is the adolescent, rather than the child, who holds the key place in Western literature’s most influential narrative of development, the *bildungsroman*. The *bildungsroman* relies for its plotlines on the choices encountered by a young person on the verge of adulthood. According to Franco Moretti, the central dynamic of the *bildungsroman* is marked by a tension between a narrative drive towards a settled telos-- adulthood, marriage and vocation-- and a contrasting urge to linger in present-centered, picaresque pleasures signalled by circulating capital and the aesthetic, which in the nineteenth century became identified with the emotionally charged, and experimental moment of modern youth.[[2]](#endnote-2) Jed Esty has recently noted the ways in which many canonical modernist novels feature adolescents who fail to grow up, connecting this recurring anti-developmental plot to the placement of many of these novels in colonial contact zones, ‘where uneven development is a conspicuous fact of both personal and political life’ (Esty 2). I aim to build on Esty’s and Moretti’s arguments to suggest the ways in which these two novels by McCullers and Morrison might critically reflect on the uneven development of gender, race, sexuality, and age in America. I will suggest that we can use Judith Butler’s formulations about the structural melancholia of gender and sexual object choice, and Kathryn Bond Stockton’s formulation of the queer child as “growing sideways,” to posit a queer temporal melancholia at the heart of these novels; the incorporation of a dead boy in the shakily developing narrative of the adolescent girl represents both individual characters’ etiolated possibilities in relation to communal futures, and the inadequacies of the *bildungsroman* structure to contain and explain these girls’ stories. In *The Member of the Wedding* and *Sula*, any possibility of “coming of age” for adolescent girls is, derailed by boys who, by failing to grow up, function dually as objects of desire and warning, and who remain melancholically present in their narratives.

*The Member of the Wedding* and *Sula* are commonly classed as “coming of age” novels; both portray the landscape of the young girl growing up in southern and rural United States in the first half of the 20th century as a series of fraught and dangerous negotiations. Although both books show adolescent girls discovering sex and desire (unfortunately for them, rarely present at the same time), those often-thought-to-be defining adolescent experiences and feelings are not precisely the focus of either work. Rather the emotions generated by awakening sexual feelings and knowledge are but one aspect of a terrifying sense of incompleteness endemic to the adolescent girl (Frankie is described as an “unjoined person” in the first paragraph of *Member of the Wedding* (*Member* 7) and Sula and Nel are “unshaped and formless things” (*Sula* 53)). The novels suggest that this formlessness might be simultaneously a product of a product of adolescence, an in-between time of life imagined to be universal, and a product of a very specific historical, racial, gender, and economic circumstances. One should, logically, inevitably, “grow out of” and leave behind adolescence; but history, race, gender and economic circumstances are much harder to “grow out of”. If those circumstances are what “unjoins” you, you may be find yourself in a developmental bind.

McCullers and Morrison share a literary heritage and metaphorical terrain.[[3]](#endnote-3) Both novels have inspired compelling lesbian and queer readings (in part because of the ways in which they problematize a developmental narrative that leads inevitably toward heterosexuality),[[4]](#endnote-4) and both are shadowed by racial tensions and inequality (uneven development for blacks and whites). Both also take place against the disruptive background violence of wars (World War I initially in *Sula*, and World War II in *Member of the Wedding*), and share the tropes of disfigurement of a Southern Gothic tradition, employing violent acts and imagery, scars, wounds, and disability. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, both novelists have also been claimed by a mainstream literary sensibility which is expected to favour the sentimental and redemptive.[[5]](#endnote-5) Morrison was Oprah Winfrey’s favourite[[6]](#endnote-6) and *The Member of the Wedding* is often misremembered as a sweet coming of age tale. (That is how my mother presented it to me when she urged me to read it in high school.)[[7]](#endnote-7)

There are other more explicit connections between the two authors. In *The Member of the Wedding*, Frankie’s chief confidante and foil is the African-American housekeeper Berenice Sadie Brown, who sports a blue glass eye (acquired after one of several good-for-nothing husbands gouges her eye out): “It stared out fixed and wild from her quiet, coloured face, and why she had wanted a blue eye nobody human would ever know.” (*Member* 9) The title of Morrison’s first novel *The Bluest Eye*, which is in part about the debilitating and tragic effects of white standards of beauty on a poor black community, surely owes something to Berenice’s odd-colored glass eye, although the blue eye on the black woman signifies differently in the two novels. Berenice’s choice may seem bizarre to Frankie, but it gestures towards a potentially radical desire to elide racial difference. When the threesome of Berenice, Frankie, and John Henry sit around Frankie’s kitchen table imagining how they would re-do the world if they were “lord high creators”, Berenice opts for a world where “there would be no separate coloured people in the world, but all human beings would be light brown colour with blue eyes and black hair” (*Member* 114-115). By contrast, in *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola’s desire for blue eyes functions as an impossible and self-destructive capitulation to white standards of feminine beauty and self-worth. Morrison takes Berenice’s choice of eye color (to her, an expression of the art of the possible) and exposes the potentially damaging fall-out from that experimental desire for a post-racial utopia.

McCullers and Morrison also share a fascination with the (literal and figurative) breaking apart of the individual and social body, and the creative possibilities for living differently that this dismantling might engender.[[8]](#endnote-8) Both authors seem fascinated by the unformed, experimental adolescent girl, who is, on the one hand, full of potential for uncharted narrative swerve, and on the other, potentially dangerous, to herself and others. What I want to consider is the figure who appears to be most at risk, directly or indirectly, from these adolescent girls that of a young (possibly queer) 6 year old boy whose death shadows both novels as collateral damage. I will suggest these dead young boys have a strong bearing on McCullers’ and Morrison’s critical deformations of the American *bildungsroman*. Through their representation of “unjoined” narrative time, and “unjoined” bodies, both novels challenge the progression of developmental narrative. I will consider this in more detail, before going on to a reading of the deaths of the two boys.

*The Member of the Wedding* charts the failure of 12 year old Frankie’s hopeless crush on, and desire to be part of, her brother’s wedding. As critics have noted, for the tomboy Frankie, this crush on the wedding does not translate into a desire to secure her own hetero-normative reproductive future, in the form of a wedding for herself (the traditional finale to the female *bildungsroman* or the marriage plot). Rather it represents a desire to find herself (or lose herself) within the queer threesome of herself, her brother and his bride in an imagined, adventure-filled communal future: “*They are* *the we of me*” (52) she says, and pictures them alphabetically globe-trotting through Alaska, Africa, Burma (85-6). [[9]](#endnote-9) *Member*, then, is a novel which, from the beginning, refuses to ratify, or even fully recognize the significance of the event in its title.[[10]](#endnote-10) The novel’s famous opening introduces Frankie in a kind of narrative and bodily freefall: “It happened that green and crazy summer when Frankie was twelve years old. This was the summer when for a long time she had not been a member. She belonged to no club and was member of nothing in the world. Frankie had become an unjoined person who hung around in doorways, and she was afraid” (*Member* 7). Frankie’s liminal status as a doorway hanger has helped to define the book as an adolescent “coming of age” classic: through which door will Frankie exit? What, or with whom, will she join? However, another question that the first paragraph raises might serve to dismantle the assumption that this is a book that is inevitably about joining, exiting, or forward movement, ie. what is the precise referent of the “it” that “happened” in “It happened that green and crazy summer…”? As Nicole Seymour has pointed out, the referent is by no means necessarily the wedding in the title, which, although central to Frankie’s fantasy life throughout the first two sections of the book, takes place finally rapidly and outside of the novel’s direct narration: “The next hours were unexplainable…from the beginning to the end the wedding was unmanaged as a nightmare” (*Member* 168). Seymour has argued that *Member* undoes expected teleologies of adolescent narrative development through Frankie’s inability to narrate her recent past, and through the omniscient narration’s constant circling back on itself. Despite the fact that the central events of *Member* take place over only four days, McCullers repeatedly employs analepsis, the evocation after the fact of events that occurred earlier in the story. This repeated going over the same ground in a novel that begins with Frankie in a doorway, hesitating about going onwards or elsewhere, has the effect of challenging the expectation attached to the conventional *bildungsroman* of adolescent development. As Seymour argues ‘Through…[analepsis], the text formally opposes the narrative teleology that undergirds the concept of adolescence; as *Member*’s narration constantly ‘lapses’ into the past it counters the forward momentum associated with both the figure of the adolescent and narrative itself” (Seymour 306). From its beginning to its open end (Frankie’s unfinished sentence “I am simply mad about---” (190)), the novel systematically queers and derails the sentimentalized developmental plot of the adolescent girl for which it has become a byword.

If *The Member of the Wedding* focuses primarily on those few days before Frankie’s brother’s wedding, *Sula*, by contrast unfolds over many decades. Although the book proffers the eponymous Sula Peace and her best friend, later enemy, Nel Wright, as potential protagonists, it does not easily read as a *bildungsroman*, even a negative one, of female development. An episodic work filled with magical realist, mythopoetic events, it pushes against developmental narrative expectations. *Sula* begins with prolepsis, predicting oblivion-- the erasure of a community, the Bottom, from history: “A steel ball will knock to dust Irene’s Palace of Cosmetology, where women used to lean their heads back on sink trays and doze while Irene lathered Nu Nile into their hair. Men in khaki work clothes will pry loose the slats of Reba’s Grill, where the owner cooked in her hat because she couldn’t remember the ingredients without it. There will be nothing left of the Bottom (the footbridge that crossed the river is already gone), but perhaps it is just as well, since it wasn’t a town anyway: just a neighborhood...” (*Sula* 3-4) If *The Member of the Wedding* charts one young white girl’s struggle to find a place in, or escape, the stable, if oppressive, racial and gender norms of a small Southern community, then *Sula*’s potentially developmental narrative arc-- Nel and Sula’s early friendship, their estrangement because of Sula’s sexual encounter with Nel’s husband, the death of Sula, and Nel’s realization about the importance to her of their relationship—takes place in the shadow of a disappearing communal structure. In *Sula*, Frankie’s unjoined-ness is writ large, on Sula and Nel the adolescent girlfriends who are incomplete, “unshaped and formless things” (*Sula* 53), but also on the Bottom itself, a place that will never “grow up” or develop economically.[[11]](#endnote-11) In fact we see each move toward this development—especially in the unbuilt bridge and destroyed tunnel that would connect the Bottom to the larger town-- systematically dismantled.

*Sula* also begins in the shadow of a different kind of problem with time, the temporal and historical discontinuities experienced by a black shell shocked soldier in the aftermath of World War I. The book focuses initially on the bodily and mental incoherence of the ex-soldier Shadrack who will later become the town crazy, and instigate the ritual of National Suicide Day every January 3rd, marching through the streets of the Bottom, ringing a bell and urging everyone to commit suicide with him. Shadrack becomes one of the book’s most powerful anti-developmental voices, with his ringing yearly endorsement of “no future.” He also, paradoxically, survives. Acting out the yearly ritual of National Suicide Day serves to work it through as ritual rather than as reality (Freud, “Remembering”). The finality even of death is denied, and a future of “no future” continues.

Shell shock is a disease of temporal disjunction; one consequence for its victims is a traumatic inability to reconstruct a coherent narrative of their lives. Shadrack’s shell shock also lines up almost too well with Morrison’s portrayal of a soul-destroying incapacity haunting all the men of the book, and the trauma of a community (not even a ‘town anyway; just a neighbourhood’) that will never develop. Characters such as Shadrack and Plum are mentally scarred, and symbolically made effeminate by the war, but all black men in the book are subject to what might be called a plot deficit; there is no fulfilling, productive future available for them.[[12]](#endnote-12) Jude, for instance, longs to help build the bridge that will connect Medallion to Porter’s Landing, the town on the other side of the river, but he, like all the other under-employed black men of the novel, is never chosen for the work, and instead remains in his demeaning and symbolically emasculating service job as a waiter: “His arms ached for something heavier than trays, for something dirtier than peelings... More than anything he wanted the camaraderie of the road men: the lunch buckets, the hollering, the body movements that in the end produced something real, something he could point to. ‘I built that road,’ he could say” (*Sula* 81-2).

Acts of creation in the book— building something, often from nothing- are more easily available to women than men. Sula’s own dangerous, experimental, aesthetic life as an “artist with no art form” (121) links her to her grandmother, Eva Peace, who designs her own architecturally experimental house: “There were rooms that had three doors, others that opened out on the porch only and were inaccessible from any other part of the house; others that you could get to only by going through somebody’s bedroom” (30). The men of the book do not build anything and tend to have infantilizing names such as Boy-boy, Plum or Chicken Little, which distinguish them from the stronger, more clearly defined women. Along with World War I, Vietnam also hovers in the background of the political landscape of *Sula*. Shadrack’s complete lack of understanding of the war he finds himself in, Plum’s heroin addiction, and the background noise of the history of black soldiers in America required to fight for a nation which granted them only grudging, nominal rights and citizenship, all remind readers that *Sula* is a novel of 1973, reflecting on many uneven histories including the failed development of black rural communities, overwritten by white land development (the buying up of the Bottom for the top).[[13]](#endnote-13) This historical story of “failure to develop” is mirrored in the story of the failed friendship, and frustrated lives of the two girls, Sula and Nel. *L*ike *Member of the Wedding*, *Sula* is about the difficulty of imagining a way of connecting the past to a possible future.

Shellshock, of course, “unjoins” the body, as well as time. In the chapter of *Sula* titled “*1919”*, Shadrack witnesses the headless body of a soldier near him still running; subsequently his own hands come to seem menacing and monstrous, separate from himself (12). The body in part, unjoined from itself, figures centrally for both McCullers and Morrison; in *Member*, Berenice has a missing eye; in *Sula*, Eva’s leg is enigmatically lost or sacrificed (*Sula* 30-31). Eva and Berenice are both portrayed as powerful black women, whose missing body parts put them in a mythic tradition that connects oracular strength and disability.[[14]](#endnote-14) Both novelists also offer an understanding of the desire for self-control and determination that co-exists with their characters’ dangerous forays into self-harm. Eva, needing to support her family which is near starvation after her husband’s desertion, apparently barters her body for financial security (she is rumoured to have stuck her leg under a train to get the insurance money). Sula, in a chilling scene, fends off a possible attack on her and Nel from a gang of Irish immigrant boys by slicing off the tip of her own finger with a knife and then saying “If I could do that to myself, what do you supposed I’ll do to you?” (*Sula* 54-55) Again there is a precedent in McCullers’ Frankie who slices the skin off the bottoms of her feet (*Member* 36-7), while Mick in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, inspired into a near orgiastic frenzy by hearing Beethoven, scrapes rocks on her hands and legs until she bleeds (*Heart* 108).[[15]](#endnote-15) Both the powerlessness of the adolescent girl to remake her world, and the long shadow of slavery’s dispossession of selves and bodies, gets turned around by McCullers’ and Morrison’s adolescent girls, black and white, who turn violence on themselves in attempts to assert self-determination.[[16]](#endnote-16) Self-harm persists in the books as a kind of dangerous aesthetic experiment for the adolescent girl who has few other resources. Morrison is explicit about Sula and Nel’s predicament: “Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be” (*Sula* 52). One could read *The Member of the Wedding* and *Sula* as documenting, at least in part, the failures of these adolescent experiments in self-creation, which can leave violent or deadly remainders.

Self-harm might provide the illusion of control—the deliberate unjoining of one’s body, but the adolescent girl’s body also appears incoherent in other ways which are tied to narratives of development and growth. Frankie’s body appears to her to be freakishly, rapidly, expanding. She is explicitly afraid of growing *up*, of literally growing too tall: “If she reached her height on her eighteenth birthday, she had five and one-sixth growing years ahead of her. Therefore, according to mathematics and unless she could somehow stop herself, she would grow to be over nine feet tall...She would be a Freak” (25). The freaks who inhabit the carnival suggest to her the only club she is fit to join: “She was afraid of all the Freaks, for it seemed to her that they had looked at her in a secret way and tried to connect their eyes with hers, as though to say: we know you.” (*Member* 27). The book’s shadowy freakishness, which is rejected by Frankie, but embraced by her young cousin John Henry, and partaken of ambivalently by Berenice, the family housekeeper and sometime confidante, can be considered a version of what Stockton has called “growing sideways” (*Queer Child* 2009), a textual strategy, coalescing around the figure of the child, which works to subvert hetero-normative developmental teleologies.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Frankie’s appealing cousin John Henry West, is the novel’s strongest representation of the possibilities for “growing sideways” and he has often been read as a queer child. He dresses up in girls’s clothes, takes up Frankie’s discarded doll, and tries her perfume. Asserting the positive force of Freakishness, both by loving Frankie and calling the Pin Head girl at the Carnival “the cutest little girl [he] ever saw” (27), John Henry is a link to the childhood self that Frankie is constantly disavowing, and reabsorbing, in her experiments in self-creation.[[18]](#endnote-18) In the first section Frankie treats John Henry like a yo-yo, first wanting him to sleep with her, to assuage her fears and loneliness, after her father has exiled her from sleeping in his bed, but later pushing him away. We might consider the arc of the novel in part a way of answering the question “who will Frankie sleep with?” After his death John Henry returns briefly to Frankie’s bed but only in her “nightmare dreams” (189), but she ends the novel waiting for her new friend, Mary Littlejohn to come and “spend the night” (186).

In one much discussed scene, John Henry carefully molds a little biscuit man “with separate fingers, a hat on, and even walking stick. John Henry had worked so hard that the dough was now grey and wet. But it was a perfect little biscuit man, and, as a matter of fact, it reminded Frankie of John Henry himself.” (15) Unfortunately after it has been baked “they saw that it looked exactly like any biscuit man ever made by a child—it had swelled so that all the work of John Henry had been cooked out, the fingers were run together, and the walking stick resembled a sort of tail. But John Henry just looked at it through his glasses, wiped it with his napkin, and buttered the left foot” (15). John Henry’s determined, untroubled eating of himself can be seen as an allegory of the way in which the novel’s developmental storyline functions for Frankie. The little biscuit dandy that John Henry so lovingly creates might be the queer child’s joyous attempt at individual self-creation, a culinary stab at not being “caught” by narrowly defined gender, race, and class developmental conventions.[[19]](#endnote-19) Despite its metamorphic, fluid elements (the walking stick turned into a tail), John Henry’s queer biscuit man eventually runs together to make it like every other child’s biscuit man, and him, perhaps, more like every other child. Yet when John Henry calmly eats his self-portrait we might also consider the way he seems to accept the different possible versions of himself: dandified queer child, freakishly grotesque, or just like every other kid, with apparent ease. One ongoing critical argument about the end of *Member* concerns whether Frankie finally submits to the law, becoming a conventional southern girl, cutting out her sandwiches in imitation of proper southern lady conventions, or whether her newfound passion for Mary Littlejohn is queer enough to derail that ending. John Henry’s biscuit man might indicate the ways that the queer survives within the conventional, his biscuit man remaining as a food-ghost within Frances’s fancily cut sandwiches (185). And, as critics have pointed out, John Henry’s name resurfaces in Mary’s surname.

Like Berenice Sadie Brown, John Henry is an unacknowledged “we” of Frankie. He comforts her when an ex-friend says she smells bad: “patting her neck with tiny little pats” (18). When he shares her bed, she strokes his body in a scene that recalls Mick’s embrace of Bubber in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*: “Carefully she put her hand on his stomach and moved closer; it felt as though a little clock was ticking inside him and he smelled of sweat and Sweet Serenade” (21). John Henry is consistently linked to time and clocks in the book (his meticulous making of biscuit men makes him seem like a “tiny watchmaker” (15)). But here he is also a small perfumed time bomb ticking away towards a gruesome death at the end of the book. It is he who makes explicit the book’s uncomfortable understanding of hetero-futurity, the connection between the ritualised time of marriage and death, joining and unjoining, saying after they hear of the death of a relation: “Uncle Charles is dead and we are going to the wedding” (109).

John Henry’s own death in the final section is another example of analepsis, missed out in the now of the narrative and told retrospectively, only available to Frankie through the narrative of Berenice who nurses him through his meningitis:

As the bright days followed one upon the other, the words of Berenice became so terrible that she would listen in a spell of horror, but a part of her could not believe. John Henry had been screaming for three days and his eyeballs were walled up in a corner, stuck and blind. He lay there finally with his head drawn back in a buckled way, and he had lost the strength to scream. He died the Tuesday after the Fair was gone, a golden morning of the most butterflies, the clearest sky (189).

And Frankie seems quickly and apparently successfully to forget him. When he does return briefly in her nightmares, his uncanny form recalls his freakish biscuit man, the Pin-head girl, and himself in make-up. He appears to Frankie in “nightmare dreams, like an escaped child dummy from the window of a department store, the wax legs moving stiffly only at joints, and the wax face wizened and faintly painted, coming towards her until terror snatched her awake” (189). But John Henry’s presence is fleeting, “the dreams came only once or twice, and the daytime was now filled with radar, school, and Mary Littlejohn” (189). Is it that, as some critics have argued, John Henry, and the radical alternatives to rigid patriarchal structures that he offers, must go, and go painfully, in order for Frankie to have a future of radar, school and Mary Littlejohn?[[20]](#endnote-20) This may be one way of understanding the painful losses and disavowals that are necessary to construct, from McCullers’ stubborn material, a queer developmental *bildungsroman* of her own for Frankie, but I want to suggest a more nuanced interpretation of John Henry’s death by developing some parallels with a similar scene in *Sula*.

The sudden death of a boy child is also symbolically central to Morrison’s novel. In the crucial chapter, *1922*, the 12-year-old girl friends Sula Peace and Nel Wright wander through the long hot summer in the Bottom, encountering various enlightening incidents about their place (and lack of place) in the world. [[21]](#endnote-21) They discover themselves as sexually valued, and devalued, when they are called “pig meat” by men down by the corner store (50). Sula and Nel resemble Frankie in assuming a kind of adolescent girl flaneurship; both watchers and spectacle, they travel between a loose world of childhood and a caught world of adulthood. As with Frankie, nobody seems concerned that they are out on the streets. In a pivotal moment Sula overhears her mother, Hannah, declare to her friends, “‘I love Sula. I just don’t like her. That’s the difference’”(57). Frankie’s mother is dead before the novel begins; this moment functions to sever Sula from her mother, not long before her actual death. Her mother’s words in a sense cut Sula loose like a balloon, sending her “flying up the stairs” (57); later when Hannah accidentally goes up in flames, the newly formed aesthete Sula will watch with interest, rather than horror or any attempt to save her (78).

After overhearing Hannah’s words, Sula and Nel run down to the river and there encounter “a little boy in too big knickers”, Chicken Little, whose name gives this incident an apocalyptic scope even as it simultaneously emphasizes his diminutive, unthreatening status (59). Sula helps him ascend to the heights of a kind of jouissance, climbing a tree from which he can see farther than he’s ever seen before, “I ain’t never coming down,” he hollers joyfully (60). But he does and they continue their play.

Sula picked him up by his hands and swung him outward then around and around. His knickers ballooned and his shrieks of frightened joy startled the birds and the fat grasshoppers. When he slipped from her hands and sailed away out over the water they could still hear his bubbly laughter.

The water darkened and closed quickly over the place where Chicken Little sank. The pressure of his hard and tight little fingers was still in Sula’s palms as she stood looking at the closed place in the water. They expected him to come back up, laughing. Both girls stared at the water.

Nel spoke first. ‘Somebody saw.’ A figure appeared briefly on the opposite shore.

The only house over there was Shadrack’s. Sula glanced at Nel. Terror widened her nostrils. Had he seen?

The water was so peaceful now. There was nothing but the baking sun and something newly missing. (Sula, 60-61)

The killing of Chicken Little sets up a connection between Shadrack and Sula; Sula will later herself become, like Shadrack, the town pariah. When Sula dies the community loses its coherence along with its scapegoat, triggering the townspeople’s march to their drowning deaths in the mouth of “the tunnel they were forbidden to build” (161) on Shadrack’s National Suicide Day in 1941. Between them, Sula and Shadrack catalyze the town’s death drive; which, here, seems to correspond to a recognition that when white, capitalist, progressive teleologies are impossible to access, other forms of subversion, of refusing to move forward, of not growing up, are all that’s left. Chicken Little’s acts as a warning that the sky, on the Bottom, is really always falling, and a reminder that the tragic, comic, human, political, quotidian events of poor African American communities can be, and have been, easily erased from recent history. In other words if Chicken Little’s death is one contributing factor to the derailed “progressive” development of Sula and Nel, then there also may be no one story of race in America that can be read as a successful *bildungsroman* either.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Critics have pointed out the ways in which Chicken Little’s slipping from Sula’s hand prefigures her own unjoinedness, her inability to connect successfully to others and her desire to lead an unjoined life, as aesthete or voyeur, unaffected by the expectations or attachments of others:[[23]](#endnote-23)

She lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her. As willing to feel pain as to give pain, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure, hers was an experimental life—ever since her mother’s remarks sent her flying up those stairs, ever since her one major feeling of responsibility had been exorcised on the bank of a river with a closed place in the middle. The first experience taught her there was no other that you can could count on; the second that there was no self to count on either. She had no center, no speck around which to grow. (*Sula* 118-19)

Her mother’s words and Chicken Little’s death constitute the poles of Sula’s self-loss and self-creation. The symbolic loss of her mother’s love, in the psychoanalytic terms familiar to readers of Morrison’s work, means the loss of the first and presumably most, secure prop to identity. The second experience, Chicken Little slipping from her hands, signifies Sula’s unjoined-ness in literal terms, her inability to hold fast to another.

Feminist critics have interpreted Chicken Little’s death as, in a sense, fallout from the psychic anger of the young black girls who have, as Morrison puts it, “discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them” (*Sula* 52) Lisa Williams writes that his drowning “represents the girls’ wish to rewrite the developmental plot of women, to bury the encroaching adult emphasis on heterosexual relations as opposed to female friendship deep within the water…” (Williams 114). For Stockton, Chicken Little’s death is, like Eva’s murder of her helpless drug addict son Plum, more embracing and loving than this suggests: “this is yet another black male killed by a female who has cruelly or tenderly tucked him into death and taken him forever outside oppressions” (“Heaven’s Bottom” 106). Chicken Little’s quiet disappearance bubbling under the womblike water follows the girls’ playful encounter with him, and their dizzying raising of him to new heights (the elated Chicken cries ‘I’m a tell my brovver’ (60); the masculine fraternal bond implicit in his imagined telling may serve to erase his dependence on the girls who brought him to the heights). Joon Oluchi Lee suggests that there is a jouissance that inheres both in Chicken Little’s bond with Sula, and the slippage that leads to his death, that is part of “a silent, dangerous contract that must be signed by the boy who desires for himself a female’s femininity” (Lee 45). And it is significant that when Chicken Little returns as a kind of ghostly revenant later in the book it is in the midst of a description of what Sula gets out of her many sexual encounters. Sula, the aesthete, finds in them “misery and the ability to feel deep sorrow” (122). An immersion in actual feeling, exposes a “loneliness so profound the word itself had no meaning” (123). After orgasm, she weeps for the “littlest things” including wedding rings and prom photographs and “the tidy bodies of Cornish hens in a nest of rice” (123), an image which itself neatly repackages Chicken Little’s untidy body amidst Sula’s many other submerged emotional ghosts, losses, disavowals, and futures that never happened. In all these interpretations of Chicken Little’s death there are implicit a set of exchanges between masculinity and femininity; life-giving and death-dealing; castration and patriarchy; jouissance and profound misery; 12-year-old girls with futures and boys half their age with none.

If we place Chicken Little’s death in relation to John Henry’s we might then pose the following questions: does the young boy’s death assure the adolescent girl’s progression into adulthood, or does it derail that progression? What violent or deadly remainders are involved in “becoming adult” in these books? And what might be the psychic or affective implications – the pleasures and dangers of *not* growing up, as represented by these deaths, for the worlds portrayed by these books or for the arguably “arrested development” of the American racial *bildungsroman*? Neither Sula nor Nel properly “come of age”. Sula dies young, and the novel ends with Nel’s recognition that although she thought she’d spent her life mourning the loss of her husband Jude, it was always Sula she was really mourning: ‘We was girls together,’ she said as though explaining something. “‘O Lord Sula,’ she cried, ‘girl, girl, girlgirlgirl’” (174). The final line of the book links the circles of Chicken Little’s watery submersion to Nel’s recognition of her grief, and to the fate of the disappeared Bottom that will never reach the top: “It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow” (174). Nel finally returns to, has never fully escaped from, the mingled sorrow and joy of that “girlgirlgirl” (174).

Nel’s final cry of recognition conforms neatly to Freud’s description, in his article “Mourning and Melancholia” of the patient in the grip of melancholia who recognises that he has lost something, or someone, but who what that is, in part because of his ambivalence towards the lost object. A Freudian reading of *Sula* might posit: Nel’s heterosexual attachment to Jude, and anger at Sula for taking him, masked her deeper more structural homosexual attachment to Sula, her other half. If *Sula* concludes with the recognition of what the un-joining of girl from girl means, then *Member* ends by bringing two girls together; the doorbell rings interrupting Frankie’s sentence and announcing the arrival of Mary Littlejohn. And yet here, paradoxically, the arrival of another girl can be seen as providing Frankie with a conventional ending. In *Member*, it is the lost utopian, interracial, mixed gender, and significantly, inter-age, threesome—the “we” of Frankie, John Henry, and Berenice, that provides the melancholic loss that Frankie cannot recognise and so, according to Freud’s logic, will subsequently incorporate. It is the mixing of ages I wish finally to consider.

In *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler filters Freud on melancholia through the work of Abraham and Torok on incorporation to argue that gender and sexual identity are melancholic structures, constructed through a series of disavowals of possible sexual object and gender choices which are then encrypted on the body in such a way as to refuse any knowledge of those losses. [[24]](#endnote-24) For Butler, we *are*, our bodies *are*, in a sense, the unresolved history of those losses. I wonder here if we can trace, through these novels, a similar structure of loss and disavowal that operates around age, a melancholia that persists, and appears in a see-saw dynamic between an adolescent girl and a dead young boy who she helps to kill, or refuses to mourn? That boy may indeed be herself – the (tom)boy she once was or never got to be. Undoubtedly the crossings of gender and sexuality are important here too. The interpretations of John Henry’s and Chicken Little’s death which read the sacrifice of the young boy, whether because he is too queer to fit into the young girl’s narrowing developmental teleology (John Henry), or because he becomes a helpless victim of the young girls’ rage at white patriarchy or black men (Chicken Little), contain elements of truth. But what if there is also an age prohibition? On the one hand, it seems obvious that we can never go back in time and become our younger selves; on the other hand, thinking via prohibition might lead us to consider the constructed nature of “age” (as in the imperative “Act your age!” which would be unnecessary if age were not an act.) What if our identities are similarly based on all the inassimilable and unreachable younger versions of ourselves that we have left behind? Could this be working in tandem with, but also perhaps differently, perhaps more loosely than, Butler’s formative and structuring gender and sexual object choice prohibitions? In this essay, I have argued that, in order for a young girl’s story to progress through the restrictions of the female *bildungsroman*, she may have to kill off kill the pleasures and dangers, the wanderings, the false starts and non-teleological experiences, of being young. I have also suggested the ways in which that murder then resurfaces as a reminder that for many subjects and identities (poor, African American, female, queer) there may be no adulthood as defined by American, capitalist, heteronormative teleologies to progress towards.

If these novels encrypt haunting, forgotten, and perhaps strangely fulfilling deaths of young boys in the experimental lives of their adolescent girls, both books also contain truncated and truncating weddings.[[25]](#endnote-25) In *Member*, in Frankie’s eager prospective imagination, “the telling of the wedding had an end and a beginning, a shape like a song” (*Member* 57), a self-contained, complete fantasy. Morrison’s telling of Nel’s wedding however, suggests a different shape to a wedding, a shape located somewhere between Frankie’s fantasy and the narrative incoherence she encounters in her actual experience of her brother’s wedding: “The next hours were unexplainable…from the beginning to the end the wedding was unmanaged as a nightmare” (*Member* 168). Nel’s wedding is a joyful one, even if it prefigures a kind of death for her: her lousy, short marriage, and the disappearance of her youth via the disappearance of Sula. But significantly it is at Nel’s wedding that the community first realises something about the three abandoned boys who Eva Peace has adopted. These boys, all named Dewey, had merged in the mind of the town until they were almost indistinguishable from each other. It is while dancing at the wedding that “everybody realized for the first time that except for their magnificent teeth, the deweys would never grow. They had been forty-eight inches tall for years now, and while their size was unusual it was not unheard of. The realization was based on the fact that they remained boys in mind. Mischievous, cunning, private and completely unhousebroken, their games and interests had not changed since Hannah had them all put into first grade together” (84-5). The Deweys like Chicken Little, John Henry, and Plum, are versions of the boy who won’t or can’t grow up; a reminder to the bride who we see trying, and perhaps failing to. The Deweys remind us that not all Americans develop, mature or “come of age,” that queer “sideways” growth may be encrypted in every developmental narrative. Another “*we of me*”, as well as an embodiment of repetition, replication, fissure and stasis, the Deweys ask us to think beyond the *bildungsroman* in considering the stories that the “adolescent” American novel can tell.

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1. See Edelman, Bruhm, Stockton, Caserio, et al. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “Youth is, so to speak, modernity’s ‘essence’, the sign of the world that seeks its meaning in the *future* rather than in the past’ (Moretti, 5). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ali Smith in her introduction to *The Member of the Wedding* (Penguin, 2008) p. xii is one of the few critics to note the similarities. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Both novels portray non-heteronormative desire and the centrality of passionate relations between girls. See Whitt, Allison, Smith, Johnson, Freeman, etc. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. It would be foolish to argue that McCullers’ and Morrison’s work is never sentimental or redemptive. *Beloved* is a redemptive narrative *par excellence*, a ghost story which also deploys the violent and disturbing tropes of the Southern Gothic to excess. *Sula*, on the other hand, is anything but redemptive, and to read *The Member of the Wedding* as a redemptive narrative one must conveniently forget John Henry’s death and the fate of Honey Camden Brown. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. McCullers’ and Morrison’s novels have appeared in Oprah’s Book Club many times: *Sula* (2002); *The Bluest Eye* (2000) *Paradise* (1998) and *Song of Solomon* (1996). *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* was an Oprah choice in 2004. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. It’s not just my mother. Leslie Fiedler grossly misrepresents the book when he describes Frankie as a ‘sentimental parody of herself, who exists to stir the easy tear at the pity of it all: a child victim, to be wept over condescendingly even as she weeps over a younger child victim, her cousin, or to be responded to with vague warmth as she cuddles in the arms of her black mammy’ (*Love and Death* 485) In fact, Frankie does not weep over the death of John Henry; she barely reacts to it. I will argue conversely, that, rather than sentimentalizing his death, the book does everything it can to make it inassimilable. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See Adams for her analysis of the ways in which “McCullers’s recognition of the tyranny of the normal produces the link between queer and freak that surfaces repeatedly in her fiction” (Adams 556). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Seymour, Freeman, DuPlessis. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See Freeman on the way on which Frankie’s desires change the very shape and meaning of a wedding: “…to say that [Frankie] wants a wedding is not necessarily to say that she wants marriage. Member makes it clear—and queer—that ‘wedding’ might not only or always signify marriage and ‘membership’ might not only or always signal assimilation” (Freeman 51). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See Stockton, “Heaven’s Bottom” for a related argument about the Bottom which situates it in relation to Freud’s discussion of anality. Freud’s anal stage is supposed to be overcome on the path towards adult sexuality. Stockton uncovers the ways in which Morrison’s Bottom, and her critique of the dead-end narratives offered to African-Americans, overturns and disrupts this developmental logic. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Stockton’s subtle analysis reads Morrison as “circumventing the old stereotype of black men as ‘feminized’ by the dominant white order or by black women.” (“Heaven’s Bottom” 99). Morrison does this, Stockton suggests, by portraying black men as ‘stalled at an anal economic stage before the division into (white) masculinity and femininity’ (99). In this way she refuses to read black men’s economic productivity or lack of it solely in relation to white capitalism’s standards of success, even if characters such as Jude interpret themselves as failures. (Although Stockton’s adoption of Freud’s developmental language—“stalled”—makes it a little difficult for her to entirely escape the implications of Freud’s developmental narrative schema.) [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See Stockton, “Heaven’s Bottom”. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See Ato Quayson’s arguments about Eva in *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (Columbia University Press, 2001). The two missing body parts are also both directly or obliquely the fall-out from bad relationships: Berenice’s eye gouged out by her crazy husband, Willis Rhodes, and Eva’s leg apparently sacrificed to feed her family after her husband Boy-Boy deserts her. The missing body parts also function as signifiers of damaged black masculinity in both books, as well as a corresponding, ambivalent source of female power. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See Gleeson-White 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *Beloved* of course, turns on this problem, if the meaning of self-harm is extended to encompass the killing of Sethe’s child in her attempt to prevent her from returning to slavery. The novel is in part about recognizing that children are separate, not extensions of the maternal self, and not able to be contained by a ghostly melancholia which would incorporate them. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. “ I coin the term ‘sideways growth’ to refer to something related but not reducible to the death drive; something that locates energy, pleasure, vitality, and (e)motion in the back-and-forth of connections and extensions that are not reproductive.” (Stockton, *Queer Child* 13) [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See Adams 574-75 for a fascinating consideration of the place of the freak in *Member*. Frankie, the artist of the self, changes her name twice in the course of the book: first, from Frankie, to F. Jasmine, so that her name can begin with J-A like her brother Jarvis and his bride to be Janice; and finally to Frances in the final section. Frankie’s name changes are usually seen as part of a tripartite structure in which she moves from the tomboy of the first section, to the girl of the second section whose wild desire to be a member of something has her unsuccessful impersonating an adult, to the somewhat gender ambiguous (her crush has shifted to her friend Mary Littlejohn) but still ‘grown up’ young lady of the third. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Frankie and Berenice have an extended discussion of the words ‘loose’ and ‘caught’ (142). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. See Ellen Matlok-Ziemann 137. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. The choice of 1922, the year of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (and Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room*) seems significant, as Gurleen Grewal argues, “The novel resurrects certain phrases, motifs and images from the master poem for its own intense signifying purposes...It is tempting to see Shadrack as the wounded Fisher King, the ritual healer associated with the river and fish as a symbol of regeneration, just as his name associates him with the fiery furnace from which the ‘Lord pluckest [him]burning.’ If *The Waste Land* is a personalized expression of the all-pervasive angst attending the destruction of World War I, *Sula* expresses the long and slow death of hope in a black community, the trials of black women and black men who fought the war and suffered the disorder ever after. The images of communal life in the Bottom are the fragments Morrison shores against its ruins” (Grewal 58). I find these connections compelling, especially if we also read the Bottom’s process of erasure at the beginning of the book as related to the falling cities and collapsing empires of the poem. These Eliot allusions also serves to heighten the significance of the 1922 chapter, amidst the episodic structure of the book, and connect its focus on Sula and Nel’s adolescence to the movements of 20th century American history the novel also documents. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. The final chapter *1965*, told from an aging Nel’s perspective, begins ‘Things were so much better in 1965. Or so it seemed’ (161). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. See especially Johnson’s brilliant reading of the words ‘aesthetic’ and ‘rapport’ in relation to the binaries of the novel. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Incorporation which “denotes a magical resolution of loss, characterizes melancholy. Whereas introjections found the possibility of metaphorical signification, incorporation is antimetaphorical precisely because it maintains the loss as radically unnameable; in other words, incorporation is not only a failure to name or avow the loss, but erodes the conditions of the metaphorical signification itself.” (Butler 68) [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. I take a cue here from Elizabeth Freeman’s brilliant argument that Frankie’s repeated ejaculations ‘Manoboy!’ and ‘Boyoman!’ when she is imagining herself, Jarvis, and Janice travelling the world together, is a way of rewriting the wedding and its aftermath into a kind of queer futurity. ‘Manoboy’ and its opposite suggest a fantasized movement, back and forth, between ages and generations: “It figures Frankie’s insertion of herself into the wedding scene as a mode not merely of rewiring affiliation but reimagining eventuality itself on a queer model—that is, refusing the developmental model in which children evolve into adults, never to return.’ (65) [↑](#endnote-ref-25)